

September 4, 2019

Submitted via electronic mail

The Honorable Larry Suffredin
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RE: Proposed Rules for Ordinance No. 19-2394

Dear Chairman Suffredin and Honorable Members of the Rules and Administration Committee:

The Cook County Board of Commissioners took a historic step on April 25th, 2019 by passing the Just Housing Amendment (Ord. No. 19-2394). Through this legislative action, the County became one of the largest jurisdictions in the United States to protect people with arrests and conviction records from housing discrimination. As a result, local and state governments across the country will now look to Cook County as a model. It is in light of this responsibility to set the example for other local governments, and in careful consideration of both the language and the spirit of the Just Housing Amendment that the Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation (CAASE) submits comments in response to the draft Just Housing Amendment interpretive rules proposed by the Cook County Commission on Human Rights.

At CAASE, we offer legal services to survivors of sexual harm and educate young people to prevent future sexual harm. Last year, we helped more than 200 individual clients of ours seek justice after their experiences of sexual assault, or as victims of sex trafficking and the commercial sex industry. In our work, we see homelessness as a common vulnerability that contributes to whether a person sells sex to get money for basic needs, is able to leave an unsafe relationship, or can lead to a person becoming trafficked and ultimately can lead to a person being re-incarcerated. The need is even greater when one considers how frequently people experiencing poverty and trauma are criminalized, and face even more barriers in finding safe and secure housing upon re-entering their community after incarceration. We as a community must recognize the cycle of victimization, trauma, poverty and incarceration experienced by individuals and families throughout Cook County, which causes further harm and diminished life outcomes. Supporting the Just Housing Initiative is a critical part of these efforts, ensuring that all individuals throughout our community have access to affordable and safe housing without discrimination.

We support the full comments of the Just Housing Initiative, and specifically seek to:

1. Open housing options for individuals with arrest and conviction records and their families who face frequent housing discrimination.
2. Ensure easy and consistent interpretation of the law by the general public, especially housing providers and housing seekers.
3. Reduce enforcement costs incurred by the public.
4. Reduce compliance costs to housing providers when possible without sacrificing the effectiveness of the amendment.

Recommendations:

The Rules Must Not Exempt Public Housing Authorities.

Current language in the proposed rule creates an exemption for public housing authorities that was not authorized by the Just Housing Amendment. If not addressed, this exemption effectively creates two separate sets of rules, one set for privately owned housing and another for public housing or private subsidized housing. This will create great confusion for any private housing providers who lease both market rate and subsidized units, as well as housing seekers who may be transitioning between subsidized and market rate units. Likewise, a consistent standard will make enforcement much simpler for the commission. Lastly, persons with a conviction will have a fairer shot at the already difficult to access affordable housing options which their tax dollars subsidize.

The Rules Should Ensure People Understand Their Rights

The easiest way to prevent discrimination is to make sure people are informed of their rights by requiring housing providers to provide a know-your-rights document to housing seekers at the same time they are provided the Notice of Tenant Screening Criteria. This will ensure that applicants have a plain language explanation of their rights and make the application process smoother for renters and housing providers.

The Rules Should Remove Examples of Categories of Convictions

The Just Housing Amendment entitles every applicant—with a record or not—to be considered as an individual. Including categories of convictions in the draft interpretive rules inadvertently defines those categories as a “demonstrable risk” and permits blanket bans on people with those conviction types. All categories of convictions should be removed from the final rules to ensure that no housing seekers are automatically excluded based on a conviction category. This will ensure all applicants are assessed individually based not only on their past record but their demonstrated ability to be a good renter, neighbor, and community member.

The Rules Should Reduce the Time Limit on Considering Criminal History to 3 Years from the Date of Conviction

The draft interpretive rules propose that housing providers may only consider convictions that occurred within the last five years. However, reducing the time limit to three years would ensure that the county ordinance is in line with existing practices of the Chicago Housing Authority and Housing Authority of Cook County. A three-year time limit would also bring the county ordinance in line with state law. Individuals with conviction records, for example, may now apply for nearly all state-issued occupational licenses, and if more than three years has passed post-conviction, the state must consider the time beyond the three years as evidence of rehabilitation. A shorter time limit would help reduce administrative costs for housing providers by limiting the number of applicants in need of an individualized assessment.

We urge you to incorporate these comments into the Just Housing Rules. Home is the cornerstone from which people build better lives for themselves and their families. Every person deserves a place to call home.

Thank you,
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